Denison Journal of Religion

Volume 15 Article 2

2016

'To Free the Truth': The Depth of Latin American Theology of Liberation

Dylan Parson
Denison University

"To Free the Truth": The Depth of Latin American Theology of Liberation

Dylan Parson

"Truth is Alive and Suffering"
It is as important
to free the truth
from systems of thought
which suffocate it,
as it is to free men
from inhuman
imprisonment
to the death

— Archbishop Dom Helder Camara

There exists a discourse that, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the decay of the Communist Bloc, liberation theology fell too, supposedly a victim of its own weak foundations and over-reliance on the losing side of the Cold War conflict. Perhaps the most strident promulgator of this viewpoint is the American Catholic theologian Michael Novak, who, in 1984, penned a fairly condescending case against Latin America's liberation theology in *The New York Times,* emphasizing over and over its "naïveté." He points to what he sees as their key failure:

> The liberation theologians, standing almost entirely outside the Anglo-American intellectual tradition, totally fail to grasp the genius of the free economy in the free and pluralistic polity. . . They have an uncommon trust in the political elites to whom they intend to confide all economic (and other) decisions.[1]

Seven years later, in 1991, Novak believed himself to have been quite prescient in his critique, noting that liberation theology was on its deathbed due to what he saw as its inability to stand apart from Soviet Communism:

> In brief, the collapse of the socialist idea has deeply endangered the project of liberation theology. As an economic idea, socialism is now widely regarded as a mistake based on bad nineteenth-century economics. As a political idea, socialism is now widely regarded as too centralized and monolithic to secure basic human liberties. This

1 Michael Novak, "The Case Against Liberation Theology," *The New York Times,* October 24, 1984.

> leaves liberation theology's social theory in embarrassingly threadbare condition.[2]

Novak implies liberation theologians are nothing much beyond garden-variety Marxists, and his criticism of liberation theology's promotion of a centralized, monolithic socialism makes clear he sees their eschatological vision as a very worldly one—a global embrace of Soviet-style state communism. Through the rest of his *First Things* piece, he accuses liberationists of quietly giving up their emphasis on praxis as the Cold War came to an end, pivoting towards a focus on spirituality in order to cover up the failure of a socialist worldview. Essentially, he speaks of a kind of end of history, in which the capitalist ideal has triumphed, apparently even in the theological realm, and, just like Margaret Thatcher, declares there is no alternative to a capitalist economic order. Those who disagree, as of 1991, have seemingly proven themselves to be on the wrong side of history, whether their perspective came from the Kremlin or the cathedral in San Salvador.

Of course, Novak's conflation of liberation theology and Soviet communism is a rather strange non sequitur, though perhaps to be expected in a polemic by a prominent figure of the Reagan Administration. But the conflation is unfortunately a common one. Yes, liberation theologians make use of Marxist analysis, but that's hardly the end of their biblical hermeneutic and their thoroughly biblical theological conclusions. Liberation theology did not take a side in the Cold War. Gustavo Gutiérrez, widely considered the father of liberation theology, cites Pope John Paul II's *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* in his seminal work *A Theology of Liberation:* "The church's social doctrine is not a 'third way' between liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism. . . Rather it constitutes a category of its own."[3] Capitalism versus communism was a struggle happening around it, but it was neither. Theology of liberation, to use biblical language, was *in* the Cold War, but was not and is not of it. Gustavo Gutiérrez frames its witness in terms of Jesus' life of "eschatological radicalism," recalling that he was executed as a political criminal because that radicalism gave only the options of accepting the status quo or living the reality of the arriving Kingdom.[4] Christ committed the "Great Refusal" to accept the world the way it is.[5] Thus, his followers must do the same, rejecting the status quo as well as the notion that the options presented by this world are all that is possible. The truth is greater than the choices offered by the world, just as Archbishop Camara wrote in his prayer-poem "Truth is Alive and Suffering." Liberation theologians reject both the capitalist banner carried by the United States and the communist banner carried by the Soviet

2 Michael Novak, "Liberation Theology: What's Left," *First Things,* June 1, 1991.
3 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 175.
4 Ibid., 133.
5 Ibid., 136.

Union, recognizing that neither is the banner of Jesus Christ. Latin America, going beyond rejecting these two banners, is portrayed by the liberation theologians as being through with the necessity of choosing one of the two hegemonic forces: no more did it wish to be historical object rather than subject.

Liberation theology stands against the hegemonic rule of any order but God's own, calling for nothing less than the Kingdom of God on earth. Here lies the flaw in accusing liberationists of dogmatic Marxism. Some did indeed support the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, a common criticism; Archbishop Oscar Romero said this openly in one of his homilies.[6] But they stood, here, for a popular, democratic movement overthrowing the violently exploitative Somoza dictatorship, not for communism per se as a political end. Accusations of Marxist materialism or allegiance to Soviet-style state communism reveal ignorance of what the liberationists stood for and currently stand for, or perhaps unwillingness to disrupt the status quo marriage between Western Christendom and capital. *Sandinismo* was not enough, Marx is not enough, and socialism is not enough. Ending the power of the bourgeoisie is not enough, if social hierarchy is simply flipped for another group to dominate. Any system of thought that puts the truth of the Word of God in a box is not enough. While the response of liberation theology often leads to a political mandate, reaching theological, political, and economic conclusions, it is far more than this. It is truly exhaustive and holistic. Despite the claims of Novak and other critics, liberation theology has been a deeply spiritual movement from the beginning. It calls for holiness on a personal level, as well as a structural level, affirming that only these together can change the world and bring the coming Kingdom.

Certainly, liberation theologians and their counterparts in liberation praxis are quite radical, but they compellingly state why the nature of following Christ is itself radical. The movement of the Holy Spirit today, they say, remains radical as well, a radical inbreaking of holiness into the individual and society. A theology of liberation stands for nothing less than the coming of the kingdom itself, an order unimaginably different than our own, of justice, mercy, peace, and love in the social, political, and economic realms, as well as in the depths of the Christian's heart. Liberation theology bears a willingness to look at the Kingdom of God on the horizon and walk towards it even at the cost of martyrdom, daring to speak to the reality of the world while anchored in the Christian tradition and in the Holy Spirit, guiding with prophetic voice and pastoral hands to a "wholly new way for men and women to be human."[7]

6 Maria Lopez Vigil, *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013).
7 Gutiérrez, *Theology*, 29.

"The protests of the poor are the voice of God": Archbishop Dom Helder Camara

Perhaps one of the most underappreciated theologians and practitioners of liberation was the Brazilian Archbishop of Olinda and Recife, Dom Helder Camara, who represents a beautiful living counterpoint to the narrow caricature of liberation theology presented by Novak and other critics. Born in 1909 as one of thirteen children in a middle class family, Camara might be called a grandfather of liberation theology.[8] He brought the agenda of a preferential option for the poor to the Second Vatican Council in 1960 and stood for the poor and oppressed until forced into retirement by Pope John Paul II in 1985.[9] Known as the Bishop of the Slums, Camara was not in any way bound by some Cold War paradigm, maintaining a profoundly spiritual life, for example writing innumerable prayer-poems while also actively pastoring in the Brazilian favelas and speaking out on behalf of the oppressed at risk to his own life under the military junta. Once a man came to his front door and pointed a gun at him, threatening to assassinate him, and Camara answered, "Then you will send me straight to the Lord." The gunman replied, "I can't kill you... You belong to God."[10] All the while, throughout his long and active ministry, he compiled a magnificent corpus of theological reflection, laying the groundwork for the liberation movement and then continuing to contribute in the following decades.

Far in advance of today's burgeoning theological discussion on empire, Camara recognized its significance to Christian thought in his 1971 *The Spiral of Violence,* speaking to the economic injustice of exploitation perpetrated by the developed world on the undeveloped world as a kind of violence, oppressing human beings and leading to inevitable rebellion and then reactionary further repression.[11] The locus at his time of writing was Vietnam, which, he said, "is a field on which the capitalist empire and the socialist empire are locked in battle," with the Vietnamese trapped in the middle, many of them "wish[ing], purely and simply, to defend their country and ultimately attain the right to live in peace."[12] An avowed proponent of nonviolence, he laments this spiral of violence, devoting much of his writing to evangelizing for a Christian alternative to armed liberation struggle, one that would step outside the spiral and usher in a new future.

His solution is the establishment of what he calls Abrahamic minorities, a

8 Hugh O'Shaughnessy, "Helder Câmara—Brazil's Archbishop of the Poor," *The Guardian,* October 13, 2009, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/oct/13/brazil-helder-camara.

9 Jim Wallis et al., "A Living Example," *Sojourners*, Nov.-Dec. 1999; John Dear, "Dom Helder Camara, Presente!", *National Catholic Reporter,* April 28, 2009, http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/dom-helder-camara-presente.

10 Dear, "Dom Helder Camara."

11 Helder Camara, *The Spiral of Violence* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1971), 29-34.

12 Ibid., 42.

concept which he pulls from the Genesis narrative. Just like Abraham, who was called by God to "to do his best with the gifts he was given" and set out "to arouse his brothers in the name of God. To call. To encourage. To start moving," so too are little pockets of Christian witness.[13] Regular Christian people are invited by God to participate in his creative work, and every individual is given gifts to do just that.[14] They should join together to set out to make love flow abundantly, as God's love is abundant to all the Earth, seen in fresh water flowing from springs and the great light of the sun.[15] Stemming from a theology of liberation that Camara arrived at from his on-the-ground experience in the Brazilian slums, this is both an effort of person-to-person love and lasting structural change that pivots toward the Kingdom of love:

> We live in a world where millions of our fellow men live in inhuman conditions, practically in slavery. If we are not deaf we hear the cries of the oppressed. Their cries are the voice of God. We who live in rich countries where there are always pockets of under-development and wretchedness, hear if we want to hear, the unvoiced demands of those who have no voice and no hope. The pleas of those who have no voice and no hope are the voice of God.[16]

Those in Abrahamic minorities who call for a new world by amplifying the voice of God in the poor become "awkward friends" in a society uncomfortable with the Word. The wealthy, Camara says, will pull money from prophetic churches and finance opposition, the powerful will turn away, and the average working person will be scared of losing his or her job and family's livelihood if he or she stands up.[17] Yet, he writes a prayer-poem about the bravery prayed for by those who live in the Spirit of God:

> Let my behavior
> show men that they cannot
> part me forcibly
> from you in whom we
> breathe and move
> and are.[18]

As the book of Isaiah claims, the Abrahamic minorities will cry, "Clear the way through the wilderness for the LORD! Make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God!"[19]

13 Helder Camara, *The Desert is Fertile* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974), 9.
14 Ibid., 8.
15 Ibid., 15.
16 Ibid., 16.
17 Ibid., 24.
18 Ibid., 26.
19 Isaiah 40:3 (NRSV).

Hope From Below and Above: The Framework of the Liberation Theologians

These words of Isaiah speak exactly to what all the theologians of liberation say the Church must do. Gutiérrez quotes Jurgen Moltmann, who says the Church's theology must not "limp after reality . . . they [must] illuminate reality by displaying its future."[20] The Church must express and embody a theology that is properly anchored in on-the-ground reality while always looking toward the ecschaton. Framing this notion poetically, Gutiérrez says

> It is sinking roots where the pulse of history is beating at this moment and illuminating history with the Word of the Lord of history, who irreversibly committed himself to the present moment of humankind to carry it to its fulfillment.[21]

It must affirm that the God of the Universe is at work in our own world and always has been, and then join him. The theology that emerges here is one that reflects upon the world and on God, and then "tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed," the end point being the establishment of God's reign.[22]

In order to get to that point, liberation theology first provides a diagnosis of what afflicts the world that would ring true to any conservative Catholic or evangelical: sin. The human person is afflicted by sin, which percolates into systems and structures that maintain its power and grant it inertial resistance to being changed and redeemed. Liberation from sin is the fundamental goal of a theology of liberation, from which all other forms of liberation naturally follow. Gutiérrez again quotes Pope John Paul II, in his opening address at the Puebla Conference, that "It is from this sin, sin as the destroyer of human dignity, that we all must be liberated."[23] Christ is the liberator of all, delivering humanity from sin and the marginalized from subhuman status.

Here, to liberationists, the answers of mainstream European and American theologies are inadequate. They are quite capable of answering the intellectual questions of the nonbeliever about issues like atonement and salvation, convincing them of the reality of Jesus Christ. But they often do not answer the questions of those so marginalized they are "nonpersons."[24] A theology of liberation must write them into a narrative in which they transcend the subhuman status that has been placed upon them, giving them a reason to believe in God despite the unfathomably painful working of the world. Their questions are not, paraphrasing Robert

20 Gutiérrez, *Theology*, 11.
21 Ibid., 12.
22 Ibid.
23 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, NY, 1988), 148.
24 Ibid., viii.

McAfee Brown's preface to Gutiérrez's *The Power of the Poor in History,* the somewhat privileged "where is God, in a world where science can answer almost all our questions?" but, quoted, "How can we believe in a personal God in a world that denies our personhood?"[25] For these people and for liberation theologians, the material position of the poor is of deep and pressing concern, but improving it is not the solitary aim in a tangled web of pain and misery. Liberation theology provides an all-encompassing answer for every human pain, from poverty to, say, the destructiveness of alcoholism. It is, according to the Latin American bishops at the Medellin Conference, the "sinful situation" of Latin America that has continued to perpetrate "rejection of the Lord."[26]

What is needed, and what is Christ's good news, is a holistic, transformative liberation from sin. Referencing Vatican II's document *Gaudium et spes,* Gutiérrez insists that the idea that economic and social emancipation amount to the full liberation of humanity is "among the forms of modern atheism."[27] Neither world socioeconomic system that claims to most effectively grant economic and social salvation does so; both fall far short of the divine plan for humanity. Archbishop Helder Camara sharply writes that despite the perception of much of the West, communism is not the only godless system. Both communism *and* capitalism are inherently godless in their operation and both have "materialist roots."[28] Both "the capitalist and communist empires" are to be resisted by God's people.[29] Gustavo Gutiérrez offers another harsh critique of capitalism, in particular as practiced in Latin America with the agenda of "development" or *desarrollismo*. Though it is touted as a cure-all, liberal capitalist reform would not ever bring Latin America up to North American or European standards of living, and trusting capitalism to do so would be to treat history as "unilinear" by assuming the god of the market will raise up all peoples.[30] Even if it did so, liberation of the human person would not be complete by increased material comforts, which both the Marxists and capitalists see as the object of pursuit. Liberation must be liberation from sin, "insofar as [sin] represents a selfish turning in on oneself," and any system that does not heal that does not heal the wounds of the world.[31] Sin is the breaking of right relationship with God and neighbor, the foundational cause of all injustice and discord.

The only "system" that can help is Communion, in both its meanings. Communion as community in Christ is crucial, as is the Eucharist that rises out of it,

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 102.
27 Gutiérrez, *Theology*, 22.
28 Camara, *Desert*, 32.
29 Ibid., 16.
30 Gutiérrez, *Theology*, 49-51.
31 Ibid., 24.

which signifies the affirmation by the community that Christ is present and that the meal represents his sacrifice for the salvation of all.[32] Communion is the polar opposite of selfishness, which itself is "the negation of love," so to extend Communion between God and his people is to broaden the reign of love while counteracting the pernicious effects of sin.[33] The freedom and salvation granted by liberation in Christ is the freedom to love without limitation, and this boundless love is an unabashedly revolutionary goal that upends all the structures of our world. [34]

The revolutionary act of salvation, however, is found in the very nature of God's Creation. It "underlies all human existence," even before the foundation of the world, since Christ has always been present in the triune Godhead.[35] A central narrative of the Old Testament meanwhile is the Exodus, in which God saved his people, leading them from bondage to become the root of Israel, from which salvation will flow to all the world—from slavery to glory and beauty on the cosmic level, all through the Covenant with God.[36] Gutiérrez defines history in the words of Yves Congar, who says it "is none other than the story of his ever more generous, deeper Presence among his creatures."[37] God is constantly present among his people, pouring out love and salvation since the beginning of time. God, too, whose Kingdom of justice, peace, mercy, and love is both coming and already here, is simultaneously "I Am Who I Am" and "I Will Be What I Will Be," demanding then that the Church live in this salvific reality.[38] The nature of that Kingdom has a fundamentally political component, so injustice (created and upheld by human structures and action) must be actively addressed by those who affirm Christ is Lord.

Yet when the Church goes beyond using theology as a tool to comfort and soothe, moving instead toward trying to change the things that cause misery, its bishops and priests are often accused of "meddling in affairs outside their competence" by those who would prefer things remain the same and the Church retain a domesticated role.[39] The prophetic word rankles those who are comfortable and dominant, who wish for religion to remain, using the language of Marx, the opiate of the masses. These people argue that the world's structures and systems will be made better only when human hearts change, which, Gutiérrez counters is a thoroughly "mechanistic" argument no less absurd than the notion hearts will im-

32 Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 67-69.
33 Gutiérrez, *Theology,* 104.
34 Ibid., 24.
35 Ibid., 86-87.
36 Ibid., 88-89.
37 Ibid., 107.
38 Ibid., 95.
39 Gutiérrez, *Power,* 62.

mediately be made pure when structures are changed around them for the better.[40] He insists the *ecclesia,* the community of God assembled as the Church, must be subversive, engaging in a kind of "subterfuge" against the powers and principalities of the world, battling all that obstructs the coming Kingdom of God, including the pushback of those who "use 'Christian' notions in order to justify a social order that serves only their interests."[41] To settle for less than the coming Kingdom is to fall into what Gutiérrez calls ideology and fail in the practice of the Great Commission, to go forth and make more disciples of Jesus Christ and to teach his good news.[42] The *ecclesia* must consist of rebellious enclaves recognizing the possibility of death in the service of God, fully aware of the radicalism of "hoping against hope."[43]

For his part, answering what a better system would look like Gutiérrez calls for one that more closely reflects this idea of communion, specifically suggesting a socialist economic order—but not an authoritarian one like the Soviet Union. He quotes a panel of priests in Chile, who note the ideal of socialism "asserts that the motivation of morality and social solidarity is of higher value than that of individual interest."[44] Crafted correctly, it would build dignity and fellowship among people, reducing the structural causes of antagonism. Gutiérrez argues systemic changes like this must be made, for any struggle against human pain and misery is a step forward in the provisional "implementation of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus."[45] A cooperative social-economic order, meanwhile, would reach toward the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, who proclaimed "they shall not build for others to live in, or plant for others to eat."[46] Gutiérrez describes this prophecy as portraying an eschatological order, the Kingdom, in which "everyone profits from their own labor," and therefore "to work for a just world where there is no servitude, oppression, or alienation is to work for the advent of the Messiah."[47] To do so is nothing less than to work to, little by little, negate the deadly grip of sin.

For liberation theologians, this is not something done solely by the privileged and powerful. The poor themselves must be empowered to bring about movement in history. Here, Michael Novak's allegation that liberationists "have an uncommon trust in the political elites to whom they intend to confide all economic (and other) decisions" runs squarely into the exact *opposite* expressed by not only Gustavo Gutiérrez, but also Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino. The transformation of

40 Ibid., 47.
41 Ibid., 67-68.
42 Ibid., 69.
43 Ibid., 72.
44 Gutiérrez, *Theology.*
45 Ibid., 66-67.
46 Isaiah 65:22, quoted in Gutiérrez, *Power,* 32.
47 Gutiérrez, *Power,* 32.

the world will be spearheaded by the poor themselves, not, as Novak appears to assert, the Comintern or some other powerful body. The poor themselves possess a charism of evangelization, by living "a life of evangelical values themselves--solidarity, service, simplicity, and openness to receive the gift of God."48 Puebla declared that the evangelization of the poor opens possibilities for them to become historical agents in and of themselves; it is not just that heaven will be theirs someday, but that they are taking part in God's liberating action on Earth here and now, both for the redemption of themselves and for others worldwide.[49]

In the *comunidades de base,* or base communities, in Latin America, the Church discovered the fortitude of the empowered Christian poor to be a beautiful reality. Leonardo Boff explores the base communities in his *Ecclesiogenesis*. Describing the movement, which consists of little cell communities of devout laypeople spread all over the cities and villages of Latin America, he likens it as parallel to the early Christian Church, saying "the church sprung from the people is the same as the church sprung from the apostles."[50] Evangelists, then, first brought the Church to the isolated poor of Latin America, and now the Church bubbles up from them as well. Boff insists that base communities must be considered "genuine church," despite their differences from traditional structures in hierarchy and formality, because, like traditional church, they seek "to lead all men and women to the full communion of life with the Father and one another, through Jesus Christ, in the gift of the Holy Spirit, by the means of the mediating activity of the Church."[51]

He argues they are closer, perhaps, to the living movement of the Holy Spirit than the rigidly institutionalized hierarchy. To Boff, each of these little Christian communities exists in the tradition of Pentecost. The Spirit is speaking the language of people all over the world, including these, reaching people where they are while carrying the same Gospel message to all.[52] For this reason, seeing the power that arises from the movement of the Holy Spirit among ragtag, uneducated groups of laypeople, Boff places the locus of the Church's foundation not on Peter the Rock's apostolic legacy but on the day of Pentecost, where the Spirit inspired many to go forth.[53] The Spirit continues to enflame hearts today, such as those within the *comunidades de base* that have proven themselves to be quite capable of living out their call as liberative Christian communities. Leonardo Boff recalls one of Brazil's annual Inter-Church Meetings of Basic Communities, when, "After 480

48 Ibid., 150-51.
49 Ibid.
50 Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, 7.
51 Ibid., 12.
52 Ibid., 22.
53 Ibid., 58.

years of silence, a religious, oppressed people had the floor, and the monopoly of the corpus of church experts on speech was over."[54] Here, bishops stood in line for the microphone just like common people. Rather than one group acting as teacher for the other, all listened to the insight of all, seeking to be disciples. The heartfelt needs and thoughts of the poor were no longer mediated through professionals: theologians and members of the priesthood placed their thoughts and concerns second. Shocking those who thought that the voice of the Church ought to only come through traditional channels, Boff notes, the laity of the base communities were extraordinarily informed, passionate, and politically engaged.[55]

The people of the base communities, steeped in a liberative Christian tradition, live and walk in faith, uttering a commitment as an Abrahamic minority to strive for a new world closer to the Kingdom of God. Even in the Cold War era, they were more than mere pawns in the Soviet-American conflict. A theology of liberation empowered them to understand their own situation and come to their own conclusions (a process Gustavo Gutiérrez calls *concientizacion*) about how the world ought to be remade in the image of God's Kingdom.[56] This remaking of the world, Boff says, does not mean Marxism—"it just means Gospel."[57] Empowered by a theology of liberation in Christ, the poor are "the emerging new historical agents," throwing off systems of domination and embracing community that seeks the participation of all, regardless of merit, station, wealth, or power.[58] A theology then emerging from that location, rather than answering the questions of the "modern (bourgeois) human being," as many liberal theologies from the Global North do, instead answers the "nonperson," keeping the marginalized at the center of the theological project.[59]

The Salvadoran liberation theologian Jon Sobrino, embracing the power and agency of the masses, says working *for* them, for the liberation of the poor, is the easier side of liberation praxis. Trusting them and believing in them to live boldly as agents of salvation themselves is another question entirely, one Sobrino says requires a deep faith that the praxis of simply working with the poor or for a new world cannot provide.[60] Something is needed far more than the "scientific" assurances of Marxist theory or hope in one's own efforts. This faith is spirituality, a recognition of the power of God and a recognition that the weight of history is

54 Ibid., 35-36.
55 Ibid.
56 Gutiérrez, *Theology*, 67-68.
57 Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, 42.
58 Ibid., 44.
59 Gutiérrez, *Power*, 92.
60 Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 25.

not dropped entirely on our own shoulders.[61] True solidarity with and then trust in the poor requires nothing less than a conversion experience, including a renouncing of sin and acknowledgement that one has participated in it. In finally seeing the face of God in the poor, we recognize we have missed the image of God and ignored his people. We are called then not only to be compassionate, but to enter relationship with them, and in so doing with God as well.[62] Boff says the Church has the choice to enter into this relationship of respect, trust, and solidarity. The institutional Church has the option to continue to be affiliated with the state and the affluent and be irrelevant to the masses it leaves behind, or make a pivot towards communities like the base communities that "carry to the throne of God the cries for justice that rise up from the bowels of the earth."[63]

To do this requires a daring leap: the Church must become quite literally a poor Church. Novak, strangely, in his *First Thing*s commentary, says that Gutiérrez writes a "blistering" critique of the doctrine of spiritual poverty, but this observation is either a large misunderstanding of his text or a deliberate misstatement. Gutiérrez, in *A Theology of Liberation,* argues that in fact spiritual poverty is the ideal state for a Christian, consisting of a lack of self-possession and "above all total availability to the Lord," going on at length about its crucial importance.[64] He calls for *kenosis,* or utter self-emptying and self-giving, as seen in its fullest in Jesus Christ. It was also valued by early Christians, as we see when the author of the book of Acts, understood by the tradition to have been the apostle Luke, praised them for holding all possessions in community. Rather than making real, painful material poverty an ideal, this sharing of possessions abolished neediness among them by simply "seeing to it there were no poor."[65] Only from this kind of kenotic spiritual poverty can follow "utopia."

This notion of the poor Church and its with-ness in relationship with the poor speaks to the spiritual core of liberation theology, and this is the focus of Jon Sobrino's *Spirituality of Liberation*. Sobrino acknowledges and avows that his exploration of these themes is not new in the liberation movement. In fact, he says, "the theology of liberation, which is interested primarily and per se in the practice of the faith, emphasizes spiritual themes like prayer, contemplation, and generally what we might call a spirituality of liberation."[66] A spirituality of liberation requires what he calls "fidelity to the real"—that is, fidelity to the reality and truth of one's

61 Ibid., 26.
62 Ibid., 63.
63 Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, 8.
64 Gutiérrez, *Theology*, 171.
65 Ibid., 172-73.
66 Sobrino, *Spirituality*, 2.

relationship to the Spirit of God and of her role in history. Against all odds, hoping against hope, one must deny any negation of the reality of the eschaton of love and justice.[67] This depth of faith declares there is no end to history besides the one God ordains. Of course, it is true that the Kingdom of God often seems quite far away, and the world theologians of liberation envision is not one immediately at hand, so those like Michael Novak who accuse them of naïveté appear at first blush to have a legitimate concern. But the faith of Christians has seemed naïve since the beginning, and to be naïve is to be faithful to the reality of God's unfailing promise.

Sobrino places the root of this faith in Christ crucified:

> Even when Jesus no longer perceives the coming of the reign of God, but sees only everything imaginable to the contrary, even when he hears only silence on the part of his Father, Jesus never wavers in his fidelity. He continues his incarnation in the history he seeks to transform, though that history now be his cross.[68]

From the cross of hopelessness came resurrection and the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. *This* is the real. The Kingdom of God is coming and is always at hand, and the Church must live into that reality in whatever historical moment it finds itself, regardless of how hopeless it seems.[69] All of this requires an immensity of faith and strength to see and believe in what is not readily visible amidst often-thin evidence for the presence of the Kingdom in the world. The strength needed to keep the faith—maintain fidelity to the real—is supernatural. "The giver of life," Sobrino says, "is the Spirit," and powerful, salvific life in history is therefore impossible without her power. A life of liberation requires not only doctrine or a desire for liberation, but holiness, allowing Christ and Spirit to imbue each action, decision, and thought along the way.[70]

The Holy Spirit is God with us, just as Christ was. Sobrino notes that both the Word and Spirit of God always point towards *homo vivens*—that is, a more human life. God helps his people toward this end. Similar to most Christian theology, Christ is the exemplar; the gospels recall he "went about doing good," which seems like a small statement, but indicates Jesus himself humanized the lowest, as the Spirit does now.[71] Far more than merely sympathizing with the poor, the type of spiritual poverty that follows in the footsteps of Jesus and is demanded by a theology of liberation is to become poor, "walking with them on their path" and embracing the spirituality that comes from their position.[72] In Latin America

67 Ibid., 17.
68 Ibid., 18.
69 Ibid., 9.
70 Ibid., 66.
71 Ibid., 19-20.
72 Ibid., 59-60.

as well as elsewhere, to "drink from the well" of the poor and stand with them readily leads to persecution and martyrdom, so to be filled with the hope of what is to come is essential.[73] In pointing to real-life enactment of spiritual poverty and a spirituality of liberation, Sobrino points toward the martyrs of Latin America, and, in particular, his fellow Salvadoran, the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero. Romero and the other martyrs expressed solidarity with the oppressed even unto their own deaths, just as Jesus did.[74] Persecuted and martyred saints are a "crucified people," and persecution and martyrdom, to Sobrino, are to be expected by any follower of Christ.[75]

"Let us not be afraid to transform into flesh and blood, into living history": Archbishop Oscar Romero

Oscar Romero, for his part, fully expected both to be results of faithful Christian ministry. In a 1975 pastoral letter he wrote presciently that his "already numerous trips through the towns and the cantons have been a prolonged Palm Sunday," as he visited and built relationships among the Christian people of the Salvadoran countryside.[76] This was a number of years before he was appointed Archbishop of San Salvador, where he would act as prophet and intercessor for his whole nation. But he did not always exhibit a spirituality of liberation, and, in fact, Romero was never to refer to himself as a liberationist. Nonetheless, well into his episcopal career, he underwent a profound conversion experience that drew him deeply into spiritual poverty and a tremendously courageous stance with the poor until his assassinated in 1980.

He began his ministry as an anxiety-ridden, tense man, stringent with the rules and formalities he expected of himself and other priests, though he was considered a fair and effective leader even by those who opposed him.[77] Romero was known for his friendships with the wealthiest and most powerful families of El Salvador, in particular the coffee barons, and he was enormously popular in upper-crust society. Complains one parishioner from the earlier parts of his career, "What did we know about Monseñor Romero back then? That he was an ally of the rich ladies and that he went around blessing their parties and their mansions."[78] Another recalls his pastoral approach as being disappointing amidst the startling inequality of Salvadoran society: "To the rich, he would say, 'Love the

73 Ibid., 50; 53; 65.
74 Ibid., 81-83.
75 Ibid., 86; 91.
76 Oscar Romero, 'The Holy Spirit in the Church', 18 May 1975, http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/documents/pastoral%20letter/lost%20pastoral%20romero.pdf.
77 Vigil, *Monseñor*.
78 Ibid.

poor.' And to us poor he would tell us to love God, and that God knew what He was doing by putting us last in line, and that afterwards we would be assured a place in heaven." The rich would go to heaven if they gave alms, and so would the poor who didn't cause too much trouble.[79]

While upholding a stable social order, he did the same in his diocese's hierarchy in the atmosphere of tremendous change following Vatican II. Pushing back against the active political currents rising up from some parishes and priests, he countered that the Church must be "first and foremost Church, strong and lovely in its faith, its grace, and its hierarchical communion, so that it can be a divine sign which distinguishes itself from temporal interests."[80] He clamped down on priests teaching classes for the poor deemed too political, worrying both about the doctrine taught and the risk of teaching poor *campesinos* things from which they might draw their own conclusions unapproved by the Church.[81] The Church and temporal planes, for early Romero, were entirely separate. It was the role of "experts" in sociology and politics to speak to the problems of social injustice faced by El Salvador, "far more competently than a pastor in the Church."[82] The pastor was instead to simply summon rich and poor to love each other, and Romero clearly saw his role as bishop to be one of pastor and not prophet. It is easy to see why, when appointed Archbishop of San Salvador, he was seen by both the Salvadoran elite and Vatican hierarchy to be a safe, controllable choice.[83]

His conversion was a slow arc of great magnitude. He began to surround himself with *campesinos* and their priests, hearing personal stories of outrageous injustices as he opened church buildings to migrant coffee and cotton workers. Romero was shocked by the actions of his own friends, the coffee and cotton barons, whom he knew as "Christian" people. The bishop sat in on classes and religious meetings of the *campesinos,* and came to a realization (remembered by his priest, Father Juan Macho): "I had my reservations about these *campesinos,* but I see that they do better commentary than we do about the word of God. They've really got the idea."[84] He had begun to trust the poor, but the final straw came with the assassination of his good friend, Fr. Rutilio Grande, at the hands of American-trained Salvadoran military men. Grande was the first of many priests to be assassinated, and Romero was heartbroken. For his funeral, he boldly called for a single mass: only one mass would be held that Sunday in the entire archdiocese

79 Ibid.
80 Romero, "The Holy Spirit in the Church."
81 Vigil, *Monseñor*.
82 Romero, "The Holy Spirit in the Church."
83 Vigil, *Monseñor*.
84 Ibid.

to remember Grande. At this point the elite declared war on him because his allegiance was no longer with them, and his entire ministry was flipped upside down; vicious accusations of communism were soon to follow. "When I saw Rutilio dead," he told a priest friend, "I thought, 'If they killed him for what he was doing, it's my job to go down that same road...' So yes, I changed. But I also came back home again."[85] In the One Mass, he thundered, "Beloved priests, remain united in the authentic truth of the Gospel. This is another way to say to you, as Christ's humble successor and representative here in the Archdiocese: the one who attacks one of my priests, attacks me."[86]

He became the voice of the oppressed of El Salvador. One priest describes walking along the streets of San Salvador on a Sunday, not needing to carry a radio to hear the Archbishop, because every single household in El Salvador had their radio tuned to hear their Monseñor's homily for the week, which would lament in great detail tragedies of the week and call for change and repentance by the perpetrators, assuring them always that salvation is available to all, even torturers, murderers, and those who participated in "disappearances." Romero was the walking alternative consciousness for his country, even as he faced opposition and betrayal both from outside the Church and even inside the offices of Pope John Paul II. Romero adopted an analogy given to him by a *campesino* of what the Church ought to be: "If you put your hand into a pot of salty water and your hand is healthy, nothing happens. But if you have a scratch or a sore of some kind, ouch, it hurts! The Church is the salt of the world, and naturally where there are wounds, the salt is going to burn."[87] Any Word from the Church that fails to do this, he said, is over-abstracted and spiritualized, while instead it must speak to historical reality, "burning like the word of the prophets," because the Church must be incarnated into history.[88] "If we really want to live up to the name of followers of Christ," he said in July of 1978, "let us not be afraid to transform into flesh and blood, into living history."[89] In March of 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero gave a small mass for twenty or so people in a hospital chapel. He preached on the parable of the grain of wheat, falling on the ground and multiplying to a great harvest. As he went to lift and bless the plate of the Bread of Life to serve Communion, he was killed with a single shot to the heart and fell to the floor at the foot of the altar's crucifix. "And in an instant," said his friend Teresa Alas, who was sitting in the pews, "the floor [was] sowed with the seeds of his blood."[90]

85 Ibid.
86 Oscar Romero, "The One Mass," May 20, 1977, http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/homilies/14/14_pdf.pdf.
87 Ibid.
88 Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love*, ed. James R. Brockman (Rifton, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2011).
89 Ibid.
90 Vigil, *Monseñor*.

Archbishop Oscar Romero embodied the witness of a theology of liberation, faithful to the beloved of God at the cost of his own death. His ministry represents the depth and power of a gospel of liberation and salvation through Jesus Christ, and his life was one lived actively in history, daring to inch closer to the coming Kingdom—far more bold, far more loving than any political ideology could ever motivate, and saturated with the Holy Spirit. Archbishop Romero, Archbishop Camara, and the theologians Gutiérrez, Boff, and Sobrino present a radical gospel, a complete and transformative gospel that demands following in the footsteps of Christ. Their work is unconfined by the clashes of the Cold War empires. Instead a theology of liberation is rooted in the historical reality of any place and time. It calls for a new heaven and a new earth, and it is unsatisfied with anything less. God's revolution is incomplete until all pain and oppression has ceased, all sin is cleansed, and God reigns in love over the whole world. The ground has already been sown by the blood of the martyrs, both famous and unknown, who stood for grace, salvation, and liberation, and the Kingdom is coming and here. This is the witness of the liberation theologians, continuing to bear just as much prophetic power as it did at its writing.

WORKS CITED

Boff, Leonardo. Ecclesiogenesis: *The Base Communities Reinvent the Church.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986.

Camara, Helder. *Dom Helder Camara: Essential Writings.* Edited by Francis McDonagh. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009.

Camara, Helder. *The Desert Is Fertile.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974.

Camara, Helder. *Spiral of Violence.* London: Sheed & Ward, 1971.

Dear, John. "Dom Helder Camara, Presente!" April 28, 2009. Accessed May 11, 2015. http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/dom-helder-camara-presente.

Editors. "A Living Example." *Sojourners* 1999.

Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988.

Gutierrez, Gustavo. *Power of the Poor in History.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983.

Neuhaus, Richard. "Founding Document: Christianity and Democracy." 1981. Accessed May 10, 2015. https://theird.org/about/founding-document/.

Novak, Michael. "Liberation Theology: What's Left." *First Things* June 1, 1991. Accessed May 3, 2015. http://www.firstthings.com/article/1991/06/002-liberation-theology-whats-left.

Novak, Michael. "The Case Against Liberation Theology." *The New York Times,* October 24, 1984.

O'Shaughnessy, Hugh. "Helder Câmara – Brazil's Archbishop of the Poor." *The Guardian* (The Guardian), October 13, 2009. http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/oct/13/brazil-helder-camara.

Romero, Oscar. *The Holy Spirit in the Church.,* May 18, 1975. http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/documents/pastoral%20letter/lost%20pastoral%20romero.pdf.

Romero, Oscar. *The One Mass.*, May 20, 1977. http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/homilies/14/14_pdf.pdf.
Romero, Oscar. *The Violence of Love*. Edited by James R. Brockman. Rifton, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2011.
Sobrino, Jon, ed. No Salvation *Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008.
Sobrino, Jon. *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988.
Vigil, Maria Lopez. *Monsenor Romero: Memories in Mosaic*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013.